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[Shifting Blame: Why North Korea is Claiming "Redefector" from South is Infected with Coronavirus](#)

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**By Robert R. King**

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un called an emergency meeting of the Worker's Party Politburo on Saturday, July 25 to deal with "an emergency event" in Kaesong City "where a runaway who went to the South three years ago, a person who is suspected to have been infected with the vicious virus returned on July 19 after illegally crossing the demarcation line." The Korea Central News Agency (via [KCNAwatch.org](#)) reported that "despite the intense preventive anti-epidemic measures" taken throughout the country during the previous six months, "there happened a critical situation in which the vicious virus could be said to have entered the country" according to the Supreme Leader, who conducted the meeting.

The seriousness was underlined by the announcement that as a "preemptive measure" Kaesong City was totally isolated and districts within the city were also being isolated. At the emergency meeting, the Politburo adopted a decision "shifting from the state emergency anti-epidemic system" to the "maximum emergency system."

Another ominous tone was sounded when the meeting "sternly took up the issue of loose guard performance" in the frontier area where the "runaway to the south" had illegally crossed back into the North. Military officials were directed to undertake "an intensive investigation of the military unit responsible" and "administer a severe punishment."

Infected with the Coronavirus (COVID-19)?

The KCNA report on the Politburo meeting was quite explicit that the coronavirus had entered the North with the return of the defector who had been in South Korea for the previous three years. The North Korean Minister of Public Health [said in a television interview](#) that "Despite the efforts, it appears that a dangerous crisis has occurred in which the virus may have entered our borders."

South Korean officials [acknowledged](#) that the 24-year-old man who had defected to the South in 2017 had illegally returned to the North. He was not identified other than by his family name—Kim. According to South Korean officials, he apparently crossed under a barbed wire fence by crawling through a drainage duct in order to evade South Korean border guards, and he then swam about a mile from Ganghwa Island in the estuary of the Han River to North Korean territory near the city of Kaesong on the west coast. [Yonhap news agency](#) reported that South Korean border guards were able to identify his route because they found a bag which they believe belonged to him on Ganghwa Island.

Although the North Korean media, quoting the North Korean health minister, were quite specific in saying that the "redefector" was infected with the coronavirus, South Korean officials were equally emphatic in affirming that [he was not infected](#). A senior South Korean health official said that the young man was not registered as having tested positive for the coronavirus, and he had not been in contact with any South Koreans

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who are registered as being infected. Two individuals who had been in close contact with the "redefector" were tested and neither were infected with the coronavirus. [South Korean public health officials](#) have done a particularly good job in tracing and containing the virus, and [current health figures](#) indicate only about 50 individuals per day in a total South Korean population of some 50 million people are testing positive for coronavirus, and these are principally individuals who have recently arrived from abroad.

The number of defectors who return to North Korea has traditionally been very small. The South Korean Ministry of Unification [reported](#) that over the last five years only eleven defectors have returned to the North after resettling in South Korea. The decision to return to the North came after Mr. Kim was [accused](#) of raping another defector, and a warrant for his arrest was issued by South Korean police authorities. He also recently lost his job. North Korean media reports on the case have not mentioned the pending rape charge.

Why is the North Claiming the "Redefector" is COVID-19 Positive?

North Korea has repeatedly claimed that there are no cases whatsoever of the coronavirus in the country. Kim Jong-un [announced in July](#) that North Korea was a "shining success" in avoiding any cases of infection in the pandemic. Every country in Asia except North Korea has reported cases, but North Korea officially notified the United Nations that it had identified no cases, although only 922 individuals were tested for the virus according to the report to the UN, and all of them tested negative.

North Korean officials have not provided details of how they determined the "redefector" was positive for the coronavirus. There was no statement that he was tested, and South Korean officials have been explicit on how they concluded that he had not been infected. Why, then, did the Politburo hold an emergency meeting, and why did the North take steps indicating that the "redefector" was COVID-19 positive?

It could be that Kim Jong-un is simply following the same playbook as his friend U.S. President Donald Trump. Although the two have not been in contact recently, Kim keeps an eye on the occupant of the White House. Trump has consistently identified COVID-19 as the "China Virus" or the "Wuhan Virus." He continues to use that phrase, most recently at his White House [press conference on July 30](#). The U.S. President began the press briefing with a short comment about the death of former U.S. presidential candidate Herman Cain, who "passed away from the thing called the China virus." The President's acolytes in Congress follow his lead. When Texas Congressman Louie Gohmert [announced](#) a few days ago that he had tested positive for COVID-19, he called it "the Wuhan Virus." (He blamed the infection on his recent use of a face mask, although none of his colleagues in Congress have seen him wearing a face mask). Repeatedly and consistently branding the virus as the "China Virus" or the "Wuhan Virus" is a conscious effort by the President to distance himself from association with the pandemic and its consequences in the United States. The message is that this is a foreign disease—nothing to do with the President.

Kim Jong-un seems to be doing something very similar in the case of the supposedly infected defector returning to the North. By linking the very first admitted case of the coronavirus in North Korea to a returning defector, Kim Jong-un is identifying South Korea as the source of the infection. It did not come from within North Korea. Whether the defector actually has the COVID-19 virus is irrelevant. The source has been identified as coming from South Korea. Claiming that the defector acquired the coronavirus in the South also reinforces the Kim regime's [message](#) that life in South Korea for defectors from the North is difficult and dangerous.

Another reason for announcing a coronavirus infection in North Korea is that it justifies the argument that difficult times are the result of the pandemic, the result of external forces not the policies of the Kim regime. Even before the pandemic, North Korea was facing economic hardship because of tightened UN economic sanctions related to the country's nuclear weapons and missile programs. Tightening controls on movement because of COVID-19 has made the economic situation even more difficult. North Korea's trade with China, which had declined because of UN Security Council sanctions, came to a near halt as Pyongyang put in place border restrictions to stem the flow of COVID-19. [Trade bottomed out](#) in March when North Korean exports to China fell 96 percent to a mere \$616,000 and imports from China declined 91 percent to \$18 million. Year-to-date North Korean exports to China are down nearly 75 percent from 2019, while imports from China are down 67 percent.

It is convenient and helpful to blame a defector returning from South Korea for the first admitted case of coronavirus in North Korea. The government's policies are justified, and continued vigilance is required. Furthermore, the hard times are the result of conditions beyond the border—not the fault of the Supreme Leader or his policies.

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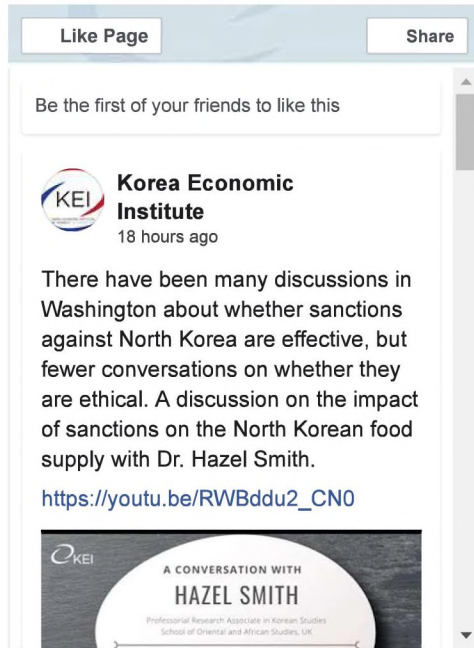
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